

High Holy Days Customs



We at Temple Shir Tikva are happy to be celebrating our High Holy Days together with you wherever you are observing them this year—in your homes, in our Sanctuary, or on the field at Camp Chickami. Although Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are observed by Jews across the globe, we know that every congregation has its own customs and traditions. Here is a peek into some of our beloved ways of being together, in person or in spirit. You might consider incorporating these traditions into your practice this year to create a deeper sense of connectedness to the Jewish community around the world and your TST family close to home.

Ritual Clothing

Ancient Jewish tradition understood that what we wear helps to shape our experience in the world in general, and in ritual and sacred moments in particular. Many of us at Temple Shir Tikva—regardless of gender identity—choose to use what we adorn ourselves with to help us define our own spiritual space on these special days and, thus, to amplify the *kavanah* (personal intention) with which we traditionally came into the sanctuary, and for this unusual year, into the sanctuary space we have created at home for ourselves. We invite you to engage in any of these customs that you would like to “try on” and suggest that if these have not been your custom in the past perhaps choosing to experiment with any or all of them this year might provide for an enhanced sense of physical connection.

A **kippah** (or yarmulke) is worn by anyone who chooses to do so on Shabbat, holidays, during moments of prayer, study, or meditation, when one enters the Sanctuary, or even throughout one’s waking hours.

A **tallit** (or tallis) is worn by Jewish adults (that is, after the age of celebrating B’ Mitzvah) who so choose during morning prayers throughout the year, or by anyone leading prayer on behalf of others (like the rabbis and cantor). Yom Kippur is the one day a year in which it is traditional for those praying to wear a tallit in the evening and throughout the day.

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Ritual Clothing

Wearing white – In Jewish tradition, white clothing is considered a symbol of the purity and renewal we strive for during this time. This evokes the theme of *t'shuvah* (return and repentance), as referenced in the book of the prophet Isaiah: “Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white. Be they red as dyed wool, they can become like fleece” (Isaiah 1:18). Some in our community choose to wear a white kippah throughout the High Holy Days or white clothing throughout the day on Yom Kippur. In addition, we dress our Torah scrolls in white throughout these Days of Awe.

“Fasting” with our clothing and adornments – According to Jewish tradition, fasting is not only about refraining from eating and drinking if one is in the appropriate physical condition to do so. The fast on Yom Kippur also traditionally means eschewing the wearing of leather, jewelry, and “anointing” oneself (today we might think of makeup, cologne, beauty lotions or perfume). In the ancient world leather was considered a luxury, a symbol of wealth, and a provision for comfort. Based upon this, some choose to wear sneakers, non-leather shoes, or even to go barefoot all day. Some also refrain from wearing makeup, jewelry, perfume or other adornments, some choose not to shave, all in service of directing our focus inwardly, rather than outwardly on our appearance.

Ritually Engaging Our Senses

The **shofar**, the horn of a ram, is traditionally blown as a spiritual wake-up call throughout the High Holy Day season. It also serves as a reminder that Abraham sacrificed a ram in place of his son Isaac. This Biblical story is read during our Torah service on the second day of Rosh HaShanah. It is traditionally blown during the Rosh HaShanah service and at the end of the day of Yom Kippur.

There are various traditions about whether the shofar should be sounded when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. In the Reform movement, the decision rests with the

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individual congregation. After careful study of the traditions and laws concerning the sounding of the shofar on Shabbat, TST's Ritual Committee decided that the value of hearing the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah outweighed the traditional concerns about carrying objects and tuning instruments on Shabbat, and we joyfully sound the shofar whenever Rosh Hashanah falls. You will be able to hear the Shofar during our online services and will have the opportunity to sign up for a time to come hear it blown in our parking lot on Rosh Hashanah this year.

The Great Aleinu is a prayer recited near the conclusion of almost all worship services in Jewish tradition. It is traditionally recited while standing, by all those who are able. The prayer includes the words, "We bend our knees and bow with gratitude," and it is traditional during most services to bow at the knees and waist at those words. This prayer originated as part of the Rosh Hashanah service. In ancient times, upon saying these words one would bow all the way down to the ground in a posture of submission before God, and many still follow this practice today as part of the "Great Aleinu," which appears in the middle the Rosh Hashanah morning service. Our rabbis and cantor follow this tradition as a symbol of humility before God, standing before the open ark and bowing to the floor. This year of home observance might be an opportune time to experiment with the practice, as well. The bow itself takes one down onto their knees, leaning forward while the head touches the floor and arms are extended, similar to a yoga "child's pose."

Tashlich ("casting") is a spiritual ritual symbolizing the casting off of our misdeeds. In following a longstanding tradition, many Jews go to a body of flowing water to throw away breadcrumbs from their pockets, as a ritual to help us reflect on our actions of the past year. We will provide guidance, as in past years, on this ritual if you choose to conduct it at home with your family and friends.

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Listening to the ancient, poignant melody of **Kol Nidrei** is for many Jewish people the very heart of the High Holy Day experience. While the text itself, is actually a dry, historically controversial legal formula for the release of promises to God (not to other humans) that will be impossible to keep in the coming year, the melody itself has had such a hold on our people that over the centuries Jewish communities rebelled against attempts to strike it from the liturgy.

On the evening of Yom Kippur, it is traditional to sing Kol Nidrei three times. As with many things in Jewish tradition, there are several different explanations for this. One explanation is that the Kol Nidre prayer should not be missed even by latecomers to the synagogue. Another is that this is done according to the custom of ancient Jewish courts, which would declare “You are released” three times when someone was released from a legally binding vow.

Striking our hearts - Our clergy and many congregants gently strike their hearts during the vidui (confessional) prayer on Yom Kippur. Ancient tradition in the Midrash states that this is not an act of self-punishment, but, rather, a way of identifying the heart as the source of responsibility, and it is through striking our hearts that we remind ourselves of this and show remorse.

Wherever and however you observe the High Holy Days this year, know that your Temple Shir Tikva family is celebrating with you, sharing in the conflicting emotions of this challenging year, and are here for you. We wish you *shanah tova u'metuka*- a new year of goodness, sweetness, and health.